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## Papa Lyman Remembers: Kroch's and Brentano's - Part 1

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# Papa Lyman Remembers

## Kroch's and Brentano's — Part I

by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor)



Before I get started on my non-chronological meandering through the world of bookselling I must correct a bibliographic boner in my April *ATG* column. Reference was made to collateral reading required of GIs taking American Studies courses at the University of Minnesota. The novel *Wieland* was cited and credited to one "Charles Bockden." Horrors! Well, it just shows that your Editor has a big, warm, Southern heart in letting me ramble on. I go to such length because Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) is credited by *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* as being "the first professional author of the U.S." For a 20-second thriller see the entry for *Wieland* in your *Oxford Companion to American Literature*. And you thought Stephen King is the father of thriller-horror stories! Incidentally, I looked up "Wieland" in my first edition (1942) of the *Oxford Companion*. Just for the heck of it I consulted the latest, 5th edition and found the entries are identical. "Plus ça change" applies here and I hasten to state that Karen Schmidt has given me permission to borrow the title of her column in *ATG*. This is a one-time borrowing because Karen promises to return to regular appearance in *ATG*.

I have never promised my readers to stay chronological — but I have tried to do so whenever possible. In this column I am purposely jumping ahead to mourn the demise of one of America's greatest and most respected bookselling enterprises. What follows will be a digression prompted by news, just received, of the imminent closing of Kroch's and Brentano's flagship bookstore at 29 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago. It was not unexpected news: for more than a decade trouble has been staring all independent booksellers in the face with changing large city demography and the influx of large bookselling chains the major causes.

Expected as it may have been, this is indeed a saddening blow to anyone who has ever worked for or dealt with what was for many decades the paragon of American bookstores among customers, among pub-

lishers and yes, among authors, as I will illustrate herein.

Here's how I became involved with Kroch's and Brentano's. In 1948 I got the notion that I could combine a bookselling operation with a summer resort. As a partner in Broadwater Lodge, Hackensack, Minnesota, I added a few bookshelves to my small fishing tackle store and I began dealing in books about the outdoors. I also dealt with a few publishers, who produced nature guide books. Broadwater was the venue for a successful juvenile book entitled *Fiddlefoot Jones of the Northwoods* by Philip D. Jordan, a University of Minnesota history professor, and published by Vanguard Press in New York. After a couple of non-earning winters in Minnesota I answered a January, 1951, Chicago newspaper ad which stated that Brentano's Book Store was seeking a bookselling clerk. I applied and was hired on by Henry M. Fujii, manager of the technical and business department, with the understanding that if I performed satisfactorily I could take the summer months off and return in subsequent October to work winter months. This arrangement worked until the fall of 1954 when W.W. Goodpasture, senior vice president of merchandising, called me to ask if I would take over management of the department because Hank Fujii was leaving to become sales manager of the University of Michigan Press. After a short span at university press marketing he founded Fujii Associates, a Chicago based consortium of sales persons which still very actively represents several publishers in the Midwest under the leadership of Jerry Stroud who took over after Fujii's untimely death.

So it came about that in the fall of 1955 I was put in charge of a staff of about six clerks in the Science, Technical and Business Department of Kroch's and Brentano's. Religion, psychology and sociology were also included in the department at that time. Managing the people was not new to me — but being in charge of buying and maintaining inventory for one of the major sections of what was rapidly becoming one of America's most highly respected bookstores, was perhaps the biggest challenge of my life.

In explaining my origins at K & B, I named Henry M. Fujii, so I will conclude my remarks about him before I proceed. Hank Fujii had a remarkable catalog in his

head. A customer could ask him if he had any books on "chemical solutions;" Hank would take the customer to the chemistry section, pull out one or perhaps two books with the statement, "this is all I have right now but I can get also the following titles for you" and then he would rattle off a list of perhaps a half dozen more titles with their authors, publishers and prices . . . Bowker had recently begun publishing *Books In Print*, a boon to booksellers and librarians who had hitherto been forced to search *Wilson's Cumulative Book Index*. Not for Fujii — he memorized the old and new titles of books he had bought and he hated to let anybody see him have to look up a title in a catalog. If his memory needed jogging he would consult his stock catalog which was kept on 4" X 6" cards.

I shall devote the remainder of this column to some remembrances of Kroch's & Brentano's as I reconstruct them from oral accounts, written records and my own memory.

In 1907 Adolph Kroch, only a few years after his arrival from Germany, opened a bookstore, "A. Kroch & Co." on Monroe Street in Chicago's Loop. The business was subsequently moved to 206 North Michigan Avenue where it remained until 1953, when it was merged with Brentano's Bookstore at 29 South Wabash where doors are soon to close forever. This merger made public knowledge of a fairly closely held secret: "Papa" Kroch had purchased Brentano's Chicago and Detroit stores as well as ownership of the name "Brentano's" in several other midwestern states about 20 years earlier when the chain had run into financial difficulties.

In 1952, Papa Kroch turned over the presidency of his business to his son, Carl, who had a degree in chemistry from Cornell University. Carl, to the best of my knowledge, never tried to get used to the banging of beakers and test tubes in a laboratory: his ears preferred the sound of cash registers ringing in the family bookstore.

He soon demonstrated his knowledge of bookselling and business acumen by a daring venture: In 1953, he affected the move of Kroch's Michigan Avenue store to 29 South Wabash where the premises of the Brentano store had been greatly enlarged. Over the double store front entrance a new sign was hung: KROCH'S & BRENTANO'S. Thus

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came into being a new name publicly acknowledging a closely held twenty-year-old corporate secret. The new store contained many unique retailing features, including "see over" racks, most of which were paid for by the publishers whose names they bore; a large area devoted to office supplies, eventually to be joined by other stock categories not ordinarily found in bookstores of that time such as phonograph records, greeting cards, magazines. The coffee shop/eatery concept had not yet (mercifully to my way of thinking), come to booksellers. Perhaps the most daring innovation was the paperback section — the first to appear in any major U.S. bookstore. Although the notion of selling paperbacks in the same store with hardbacks was regarded by many booksellers as suicidal, the move attracted other venturesome dealers, including **Louis Epstein**, proprietor of the **Pickwick** stores in the West. Soon Pickwick stores had pocketbook departments and before long almost every U.S. retail bookstore followed suit. *Life Magazine* in a 1953 story called this "a new way to sell books . . . supermarket style."

With the Brentano stores Kroch's acquired their manager, **Wendell W. Goodpasture**. "Goody" as he was known throughout the book industry had started as a young lad in **A.C. McClurg's** and had worked his way up to manager by the time the store was sold to Brentano's. Among my teachers along the way, I credit Goody with inculcating in me the science of publisher relations and the fundamentals of buying books for resale. Goody instilled a fear of the almighty in neophyte publishers' salespersons. More than once such a person would show me trembling, sweating hands after having had a first selling session with the head buyer. After another meeting or two in the austere presence, the neophytes began to love the guy. I never knew, nor heard of, anyone who had anything but great respect and admiration for W.W.G.

I could recount endless tales about Goody but a couple must be told here. Our buyers used a code word consisting of ten letters each unique so that it could stand for a cardinal number. Thus, when a publisher's representative was explaining titles from a catalog, our buyer was marking his copy with our code for the number wanted. The letter "s" was our zero. But we also had two other letters for zero, one of which was "x". After the publisher's rep had finished the appointment, Goody would say "come back tomorrow and Elsie will have your order." Elsie Adamson was his secretary to whom he would give his marked catalog. She would

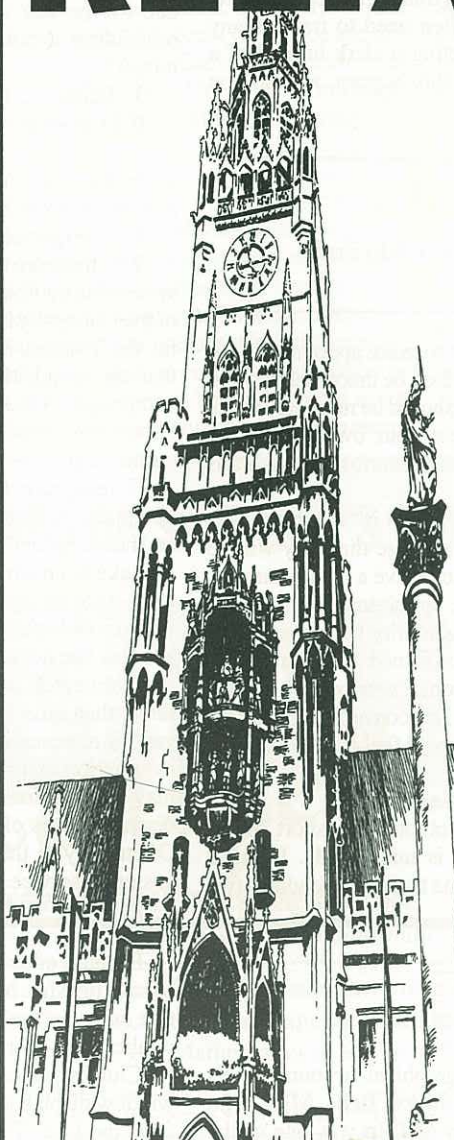
type it up and have it ready for the representative's return call. Because the rep did not know at the time of presentation just what the buyer was ordering, many an argument was avoided. There were stories that some reps, in their exuberance at seeing 3 letters by a title, would phone New York sales managers bragging that at least one hundred copies of a certain title had been ordered. Alas, the three letters could have been "sxx" or "xss" which translated to 000. I remember this happening to a **Ronald Press** rep who was promoting a title by a

world famous golfer. Ronald had been unusually ornery about giving adequate discounts on their books which we were promoting and Goody and I seized the opportunity for some revenge. Their rep was flabbergasted to find that "xsss" meant 0000 — not "1,000" as he had phoned his New York boss.

In 1962, **Stuart Brent**, an eminent and successful bookseller, and ergo a veritable competitor, whose store was (and still is) a few blocks north of the Kroch's Michigan

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# Group Therapy

## Librarians Who Don't Keep Appointments

Column Editor: **Rosann Bazirjian** (Syracuse University)

*Hey y'all out there! Do you have any gripes? Come to your therapist!*  
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### GRIPLE

Submitted by an **Anonymous Vendor**

My "gripe" is about librarians who make appointments to see vendors and sales representatives and then they do not show up. Do they forget that they have scheduled the appointment? This happens more frequently than I ever expected, and I think it is inconsiderate. Librarians do not realize that vendors often need to travel many hours to get to an appointment, and meeting a clerk instead of a librarian is a waste of a visit. Why does this happen, and do you think this is right?

### RESPONSE

Submitted by **Carol Pitts Hawks**

(Head, Acquisition Department, The Ohio State University Libraries)

No, I don't think it is right for librarians to make appointments to see vendors and sales representatives and then be unavailable when the vendor or rep arrives. A vendor's time should be respected in the same manner in which you would expect your own time to be respected. However, I can imagine several scenarios in which this could occur.

1. Leaving a message where an appointment is "assumed".

Vendors sometimes call and leave a message that they will be visiting on a particular date and time. If they leave a phone number, the librarian should call and confirm the appointment or indicate that the appointment is not possible. Availability should never be assumed; all appointments should be confirmed by both parties with a firm time and place. Statements from a vendor such as "I'll call you when I leave Cincinnati," does not constitute a firm appointment in my opinion. The librarian should feel no obligation to agree to such a loose commitment.

2. Calling for an appointment with little notice.

Vendors who call for an appointment on very short notice should not be surprised if the librarian is unavailable. I find it particularly irritating for a vendor to assume that my calendar is free


for an appointment with just a few days notice. Most academic librarians work in a very collegial environment where meetings run rampant. The time we set aside to get our real work done is very valuable to us. Yes, I may have a free hour next week, but that doesn't mean that I can spare the time to meet with a vendor. My annual report may be due (or be late as is usually the case). Two weeks notice for scheduling appointments will ensure my availability and good humor!

3. Being late to a scheduled appointment.

If an appointment was scheduled for 2:00 p.m. but the vendor does not arrive until 2:45, don't assume that I will be available for more than 15 minutes. Most days are tightly scheduled and a missed appointment cannot necessarily be shifted into the following hour.

4. Unexpected crisis.

Yes, there are unexpected crises in acquisitions -- the automated system fails without a backup having been performed; the president of the University has called for detailed financial information needed for the Trustees meeting at 1:00, etc. In those cases, there is little that the acquisitions librarian can do, other than apologize, to compensate for missing a scheduled appointment. Meeting with library staff in this circumstance may be preferred to a completely wasted trip.

I recognize that the author of this "gripe" has a legitimate complaint. I do consider it unprofessional to make appointments and not keep them. However, there are some actions that the vendor can take to ensure that more appointments are kept. Otherwise, it's up to us to recognize the importance of meeting our obligations to vendors and sales representatives. To acquisitions librarians I would add that you do not have to meet with everyone who calls you for an appointment. It would be better to be firm about your unavailability rather than miss the scheduled appointment. And, one final word to vendor representatives, I was somewhat offended by the vendor's assumption that meeting with library staff is a waste of time. That may be true for sales calls, but when ongoing service is under discussion it is often very useful to meet with those library clerks. Often, they're the ones who really know what is going on in the customer service area of the vendor's company. 

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Avenue location, published an autobiographical account of his bookselling experiences entitled *Seven Stairs*. **Bella Mell**, who represented Brent's publisher, **Houghton Mifflin** was one of the first female book "travelers." When she offered *Seven Stairs* to Kroch's, a meeting of top brass was called and it was decided that Brent who had a weekly book review radio broadcast would certainly capitalize on the martyr theme if K & B didn't have his book when he announced it. So Goody added a sizable quantity to the order.

Because of this meeting, the order was sent directly to Houghton bypassing Mrs. Mell, and no one in Boston noticed that the Brent title was not on it -- that is not until just a few days before publication -- too late to get stock out to Chicago. Luckily, McClurg's, our wholesaler, was able to supply enough copies for a window display and to fill customers' requests until copies came in from the East. The postscript to this story was that Goody always claimed that he did mark Bella's catalog with the quantity to be ordered and Elsie always claimed that the pages of her catalog describing *Seven Stairs* stuck together. My theory was that it was a Freudian error.

Enough for today. More next time! 